

# Mr. Heagy's U.S. History



Mini Read 9 The WPA (Works Progress Administration → Works Projects Administration)

The New Deal pursued a policy of trying to put money in the pockets of unemployed Americans by creating jobs for them that would provide public benefits. Those who hated the Roosevelt Administration called the program a boondoggle, a wanton waste of taxpayer money, an unconstitutional socialist program.

WPA was created in 1935 under the name Works Progress Administration. Its job was to provide jobs for millions of Americans who had been without employment for as long as five years. WPA was basically a huge construction project. It built park and recreation centers, libraries, armories, post offices, and highways. During the New Deal days, almost every community had some type of WPA project.

In addition to construction type jobs for unskilled workers, WPA provided work for artists. Graphic artists painted murals in buildings, writers in the Federal Writers Project did things like take oral histories of remaining slaves about slavery and their life as a slave, and actors were part of the WPA Theater Project that brought live performances to communities across the nation while playwrights wrote new plays that were performed beside many great traditional American plays.

The program was huge in size. WPA took over projects that had started earlier in the 1930s under the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and its successor the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. During the time it existed, 1935-1943, it gave jobs to 8,500,000 different persons. Most were men, but some were women. It carried out 1,410,000 separate projects, some very large like the construction of what is now called the Pepsi Coliseum at the Indiana State Fair Grounds, and some very small like a boat house in a small Indiana town park. Large numbers of highways were repaired or constructed under the WPA. WPA even built buildings for the states such as the Naval Armory on the White River at 30<sup>th</sup> Street in Indianapolis, which now houses the Recruiting Center for the Marines and the Indiana Naval Reserve.

WPA had a separate youth division called the National Youth Administration. It provided both work and education for individuals between 16 and 24 years of age. In 1939, NYA was transferred to another agency. It lasted until 1943, the same time WPA was abolished. At one time during its existence, Lyndon B. Johnson, of Texas was the head of the NYA. Johnson would later become President of the United States as a result of the assassination of John F. Kennedy on 22 November 1963.

Republicans and free-market purists both then and today, complained quite correctly that the WPA was wasteful when it came to spending money. This was especially true in the early years of the WPA before it got real control over projects and fiscal expenditures on those projects. During its first year, WPA spent \$1.4 billion; for the duration of the program it spent \$13.4 billion. The \$1.4 billion represented 6.7% of the United States GDP for 1935. Free-marketer's have pointed out that many WPA projects cost more than they would have had they been done by private companies. However, these critics neglect two facts. First, the projects would never have happened at all without WPA, and second the Roosevelt Administration was trying to fight an unemployment rate as high as 25% at one time. Even the money that was inefficiently spent drained off into the economy where it could be expected to create greater consumption and "prime the pump."